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Inclusion of physically disabled children through environmental rehabilitation of urban spaces case study: AL Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt

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Abstract

Sustainability as a term is used to describe various approaches that aim at improving people's way of life. Sustainable cities are the location of sustainable communities in which we find the possibility to achieve an improvement in the quality of human life while maintaining healthy ecological systems. In these cities sustainability creates a world where everyone can have a fulfilling life and can "enjoy a rich level of well-being within the limits of what nature can provide" [Sustainability Store, 2011]. The development of sustainable communities respects the relationship between Economy, Ecology and Equity or the opportunity to participate in all activities, benefits and decision making of society. This implies the participation of disabled individuals who have for long suffered from seclusion or the inability to be part of society social mainstream. In order to achieve our aim of having a sustainable equitable society we should start at the base of society concentrating on children who constitute the future. Hence the need to bring up disabled and able bodied children, together, with no preconceived ideas or negative attitudes towards each other, as that will lead to a strong, coherent society that accommodates and includes all its members regardless of their physical limitations. Being a recognized right in the UN convention for child rights, Play provides social, Physical and behavioral benefits to disabled and able bodied children. The relaxed environment through which encounter of both groups is made allows positive relationships and friendship forming, and the removal of any negative attitudes between both groups. Environmental Rehabilitation of Urban Spaces to accommodate disabled and able-bodied children is than a major step towards applying principles of sustainability. And that as it leads to mainstreaming and participation of Disabled individuals into society social life. Through a theoretical review of literature and its application to a chosen case namely, Al Azhar Park in Cairo, Egypt, this study aims at revealing the importance of creating Accessible Urban Spaces in which all children would have the opportunity to participate, together, into play which leads to more understanding between the core of society and forming a cohesive society that does not refuse, or limit the participation of any of its individuals on the basis of his or her limited abilities.

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1. Introduction

There have been various definitions of sustainability related to different approaches that include, mainly, allowing people to live a life of dignity in harmony with nature.

Sustainability allows the creation of a world where everyone can have a fulfilling life “and can enjoy a rich level of well being within the limits of what nature can provide” [Sustainability Store, 2011, 1]. Sustainable Cities are locations where “a healthy economy’s industrial base supports the quality of both human and ecological systems” [Sustainability Store, 1], and where sustainable community development provides the ability to make development choices taking into consideration the relationship between the three “E’s” that represent economy, ecology and equity, [Urban21 Conference, Berlin, July 2000, 2].

Economy or the economic activity should build local assets and self- reliance, ecology implies communities’ responsibilities towards the protection of natural assets, while equity allows the opportunity given to all citizens for full participation in all activities, and in making decisions for society.

Unlike traditional community development approaches, sustainability strategies emphasize: the whole community (instead of just disadvantaged neighbourhoods); ecosystem protection; meaningful and broad-based citizen participation; and economic self-reliance.”[Institute for Sustainable Communities, online 2011, 3].

2. Sustainability and Inclusion

Sustainable economic development has for core dimension the eradication of poverty. Poverty as a dimension is parallel to seclusion or segregation. Segregation is the status of many individuals with limited abilities who could be stigmatized or denied access to services, education and work as a result of inaccessibility and /or attitudinal barriers not allowing members of disabled group to join and participate actively into society social life.

In order to remove attitudinal barriers that might exist from able-bodied individuals towards disabled ones or the reverse, there is a need to start at the basis of society’s forming generation, that is at children’s levels and try to integrate disabled children with their able-bodied peers so that they could grow together, accepting each other with no regard to disability or its impact on one’s performing abilities.

3. Integration through Play:

Since the declaration of the United Nations convention on the child’s right, Playing has been recognized as a human right. Disabled children like able bodied ones should have the freedom to play outside that is in playgrounds, [UN, 2009, 4].

Through a relaxed environment disabled children have the opportunity to participate in play areas that allow favourable conditions for making relationships with other children that might be able-bodied. Disabled children become more confident as they realize they have special talents and strengths. A sense of belonging and acceptance by peers grows, and children learn new ways of talking, listening and communicating. They acquire more social skills and they make new friends while having their health

status improving, [John, A & Wheway, R., 2011, 5].

Playgrounds for All Children into which Disabled and Able bodied children participate together in cooperative play, allow a quality of interaction that cannot be achieved in any other environment [Collins, C, 2011, 6].

This strategy allows a greater way and a bigger possibility to overcome discrimination based on attitudes towards disability and those who represent it. However providing the necessary setting to accommodate disabled and able bodied children while playing requires preparing the environment and providing necessary equipments that would allow the participation of children, together in this activity.

3.1 Example of Integrated Playgrounds

Since the Mid-Eighties of the last century, in the USA namely in New York at Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, a Playground for All Children had been inaugurated as an experiment in integrating the play of able-bodied and disabled children.

The park had swings, seesaws and slides adapted for the disabled children, it had water-play and sand-play areas and courts for volleyball, and other games, as well as crafts, woodworking and horticultural areas. These activities were supervised by six full-time Parks Department recreational specialists, all trained in working therapeutically with the disabled, [Collins, C., 6].

Another example was the study conducted in 2003 for integrating disabled pupils in playgrounds of six primary schools in Yorkshire. The study revealed that disabled pupils were the ones who facilitated their participation in play while some of the barriers encountered were organizational, as lack of staff training, shortened time spent in playgrounds, limiting play opportunities for fear of taking risks. Other barriers were social that were caused by spending more time with adult staff that did not encourage disabled children to engage into play they wanted for fear of being harmed. There were also physical barriers that were not limited to adjusting differences in levels in schools with ramps and the provision of special toilets but these included preparing playground site to be accessible for disabled children, [Woolley, H & Armitage, M., 2006, 7].

The study revealed the important role the supervising staff could do as far as helping disabled pupils gain confidence to the extent of going to playgrounds by themselves. That, in addition to allowing the staff become aware of their constructive and supportive but not domineering role they can play in helping the child to engage in play games, or cooperative games,[Woolley, H & Armitage, M., 2006, 7].

4. Environmental Rehabilitation of An Urban Space

As the main issue here is integration or inclusion of disabled children into play areas, environmental rehabilitation would have for meaning, measures taken, or the provision of adaptive tools to alter the environment so that it adapts to the needs and abilities of those children. And that for the aim of facilitating inclusive play.

5. Case Study: Al Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt.

Al Azhar Park in Cairo is listed as one of the world's sixty great public spaces by the Project for Public Spaces. It has been created by the Historic Cities Support Programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. It was a gift to Cairo from Aga Khan IV the descendent of the Fatimid Imam Caliphs who founded the city of Cairo in the year 969, [Wikipedia, 2011, 8]. It includes restaurants, artificial lakes, tracks and Playgrounds.



Fig.1. (a) Al Azhar Park Entrance, fig (b) Accessible Entrance for Wheelchair Users.



Fig.2. (a) Inaccessible slides, (b) Stairs to Slides making them Inaccessible

5.1 Examples of Play Structures and their Adaptation to fit Disabled Children's Needs.



Fig.3.(a) Elevated Composite Structure, (b) Adapted Accessible Structure [Ref. 9]



Fig.4. (a) Accessible Entrance to Sandy Area, (b) Inclusive Area for Play in Sand [Ref. 9]

This example of a playground in the USA clarifies how altering the environment to fit the needs and limitations of disabled children allows them to make friends, feel accepted and become in the future active members of society.

6. Conclusion

As we aim to transform our cities into Sustainable Green ones, we should allow every citizen to participate and do his role in building society. This cannot be achieved if there is a group, or a minority of individuals, the disabled ones, denied access and participation into social activities.

Society should start inclusion and removal of negative barriers from able bodied and disabled ones towards each other, from the individuals' early age or children's age. And as the interaction between able bodied and disabled children is most successful when happening in a relaxed, non academic environment that is play environment, we should make the necessary amendments to these environments in order to accommodate all children regardless of their physical limitations.

Rehabilitation of urban environments, including children playgrounds, is than a big step towards having a cohesive, sustainable society that integrates all its members for strong relations and equal participation.

Recommendations

In order to have Environments that accommodate and integrate all its members we should prepare the future generations of Architects to be well trained and having greater awareness of the needs, and limitations of the members of the disability community. Through teaching Barrier Free and Universal Design concepts to architects in addition to social awareness campaigns, they would be able to provide the accessible environment that would accommodate Disabled individuals and help to make the members of this group an active, participating group that helps in achieving society aims and aspirations.

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